

Darkness Before Dawn

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Summary: Leander, a wood craftsman, discovers a woman near his cottage.

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The following General Fiction (no sub-text) story is rated PG.

Though the name Leander has been taken from a minor Greek myth, the character in this story is not the mythological figure.

Title: Darkness Before Dawn

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Dawn enthroned herself in the sky, and Nausicaa in her lovely gown awoke. - Homer

Leander set his hammer and chisel on the workbench and picked up the stool. He blew the last of the shavings away from the crescent moon he'd carved into the center of the smooth wood, then he shook his head. The carving still wasn't the way his customer in Modeia wanted it, which meant it still wasn't the way Leander wanted it. His reputation in the village was only as good as his most recent work, so the stool, and every other item ordered by Modeians, would be delivered exactly as requested. Most of them would never know if he left a slight imperfection here or there, but he would, and that knowledge was something he could never tolerate and still call himself a wood craftsman.

Seeing the sun's rays on the floor before him, Leander realized that his earliest work session was at an end. He set the stool down and walked over to the pails he filled every morning at the stream that ran by his cottage. The pails were old and weathered, nothing like the ones he made for the Modeians, but adequate nonetheless. He saw no point in adorning his home with anything other than functional items. The money he made paid for his food, tools, strings for the lyre he played in the evenings with Apollo's help, and the material to make his clothing, which, he reminded himself, would need to be purchased on his next trip to Modeia. The solstice was approaching and the snows would arrive before it. He shivered slightly at the thought of breaking the ice he would soon melt at his hearth, then he took a pail in each hand and walked to the backdoor of the cottage.

His breath betrayed the morning chill as he stepped outside, yet the earth was still soft beneath his boots. This close to the snows the earth was usually hard and unforgiving, as if an angry god sought to punish those who needed better conditions. But Leander wondered if the hand of a god might still be at work. Perhaps some weary traveler had asked Hermes, or even almighty Zeus himself, that a long journey be made easier without the burden of suffering the elements. But not until he arrived at the stream did he find what appeared to be evidence of his speculation. Just as he knew that Apollo didn't personally guide him when he played the lyre, despite the god's patronage of such music, he also knew he wouldn't find a weary traveler in the area under the protection of a god just because he'd thought of one. Yet there on the other side of the clear running stream, partially hidden in the bushes, was a woman whose blonde hair seemed woven from the sun itself.

Leander left his pails at the edge of the stream. Cautiously, he walked across the jagged stones to the other side, where dense bushes led up to an outcropping of rock and the forest beyond. He saw that she was dressed in leather battle garments that protected her while still displaying her agile figure. Moments before, Leander thought she was sleeping, having sought what little protection the bushes offered her. But now he saw that she was unconscious, and he knew that if she'd been victorious in whatever confrontation she'd had, that victory had come at a heavy price. She'd been cut and bruised by merciless weapons. A sword stained to the hilt with blood lay next to her. And he didn't need to be the keen observer he was to know that she had either fallen or been thrown from the outcropping above. The mist that danced lightly before her nose and mouth told him that she was still alive, though he knew she couldn't survive much longer in the cold.

Had she been here most of the night, he thought, all I could do is ready her for... wherever it is that one like her will end up.

He'd thought to say Elysian Fields, but he knew he couldn't until he found out whether the battle garments and weapons were the tools of a predator, or the protection of prey.

* * *

She noticed several things at once the moment she regained consciousness. The savory aroma of food simmering. The fresh scent of newly-cut wood. The warmth and comfort of the blankets spread over

her. The firmness of the bed beneath her. And slowly, like the encroachment of a cold shadow over the sun-washed earth, the pain of her body, and the realization that she had no idea where she was. Something inside of her warned her to be cautious, not to sit up as if frightened, only to consider her surroundings from where she lay lest she subject herself to some immediate danger.

On the other side of the cottage was a man sitting at a workbench carving a piece of wood. He was dressed in a heavy shirt and pants, and he seemed to handle the knife with great skill. As she searched her mind for anything that might tell her who he was and why she was there with him, he turned the knife just enough to reflect the fire that burned in the hearth next to him. The flash of light blinded her only for a moment and she gasped, but not because of the brief blinding. At the farthest edges of her clouded mind she saw flames, flames that had once consumed something very dear to her, something she... loved?

Hearing the gasp and turning, Leander saw that his guest had finally awoken. But rather than rush to her side, he rose slowly from his place at the bench and watched her silently as she considered him with the deepest brown eyes he had ever seen. And in those eyes, below the fear of her new environment, was a pain that chilled him more than the early morning. And there with it was a hatred born of a desire to destroy whatever had caused that pain. Leander was now more certain than ever that this woman was prey rather than predator.

He spoke in a soft and reassuring voice when he saw that the silence was only adding to her discomfort. "I found you by the stream yesterday morning. I brought you here so I could tend to your wounds."

She looked beneath the blanket that covered her. Her arms, legs, and midsection were all dressed in clean wraps that smelled of healing oils.

"I set the rest of your garments in the corner," Leander said, pointing to the chair on which he'd laid them. "Your weapons are there as well. I took off the garments only because I couldn't tend to your wounds properly if I didn't."

Letting the blanket fall back into place, she glanced at the chair, then back at Leander. She knew without being able to explain why that he had done only what he said, and she suddenly felt more at ease because of that.

He raised a hand in a gesture of comfort. "Please don't be afraid of me. My name is Leander. I am a wood craftsman who sells his goods in the village of Modeia. You're welcome to stay here as long as you wish."

The woman said nothing. But though she still had no idea how she'd ended up there beyond what he'd just told her, she sensed she would never have woken up again had it not been for him. She wanted to offer him her thanks and a greeting of her own, but instead she asked the one question that had to precede all else.

"Who I am?"

She has no memory, Leander thought.

"I wish I knew," he said. "But since I brought you here from the stream, I've called you Dawn because it was then that I found you."

Content for the moment, she settled herself into the blankets. Dawn, she thought. The beginning of a new day.

* * *

For the next ten sunsets, Leander tried to help Dawn regain her memory while she regained her strength. The latter returned almost immediately with no other help, however, so he couldn't help but marvel at her skill and agility. Despite his years of working with knives, she was more skilled with them than he was, she defeated him every time they had a knife throwing contest behind the cottage, and the first time she threw, she buried the knife so deeply in a block of wood that he had to split the block in half to free the knife. She handled her sword like it was an extension of her arm and mind. Their walks became runs through the forest that left Leander breathlessly waiting for her return. And she tested the strength of the stools and benches he repaired by standing on them, then springing off into graceful front and back flips that always left her back in place without so much as a flushed cheek.

To help her regain her memory, Leander set a scroll and quill on a bench near her bed and told her to write down even traces of memories, since all of them together might remind her of who she was and where she came from. And though the list slowly grew in number, Leander became concerned that some parts of her life might not be worth remembering after all. She had images of fire, weapons, screaming, bloodshed, chaos, and, most tragically of all, having lost something so precious that it could seemingly never be recovered. All that combined with her battle garments and weapons would have convinced Leander that she was in fact a marauder. But he decided in the end that the gentle creature he came know and respect couldn't be anything other than a victim, and a hero. Her memories must be the horrid conditions from which she'd saved so many people. And whatever it was that had left her by the stream was part of the violence she couldn't escape because she was fighting against it.

The morning before the eleventh sunset, Leander readied his cart and one of his two pale horses for the ride to Modeia. He told Dawn to stay in the cottage with the doors bolted until he returned. Knowing her skills as he did, he didn't have as many concerns for her safety as he might have, but this would be the first time they'd been apart since he'd found her so he didn't want to take any chances. He would return well before sunset, however, hopefully with information about who she was. He intended to ask some of those he met if they knew anything of a blonde woman who'd recently met with trouble in the area. He would choose his informants carefully, though, since he could unintentionally reveal her whereabouts to someone who wished her ill. Though no one had come to the cottage in search of her since he'd found her, those responsible for her condition at the stream might still be in the area, or perhaps in contact with some of the villagers.

Hoping for but not yet daring a kiss, Leander bid her farewell and left for Modeia.

* * *

By the time he was ready to leave Modeia, Leander was empowered by the compliments he'd received on his work, yet miserably frustrated because he hadn't discovered anything about his guest. He decided to speak with a woman whom he thought might know something since she prided herself on knowing everything. He typically avoided Modeia's gossips, finding them good for nothing except trouble, but he refused to return home without something beyond a promise to continue asking. He knew that if he came even remotely close to a topic like new people in the area, this woman would spill everything she knew. Yet he also knew that she talked to too many people about too many things to remember anything other than having spoken to him about something. To his great dismay, however, she knew nothing that helped, and though she did tell him about a number of people, along with what they were doing or thought they were doing, he finally waved her off with a shallow goodbye, turned for home, and came face-to-face with the last person he ever expected to see.

"Xena," he said, immediately recognizing the beautiful, confident woman who stood before him. Next to her was her companion Gabrielle.

Xena nodded to acknowledge his recognition. "You've been asking about a woman that you found nearby."

"Yes," Leander said, not bothering to conceal his eagerness. Whoever had told Xena about his inquiries must have thought she could help. "I found her ten sunsets ago near a stream by my cottage. She was badly wounded. Do you know who she is?"

"I think so," Xena said, the concern in her voice evident. "Describe her to me."

"Sun-washed blonde hair. Dark brown eyes. Soft pale skin. A radiant smile any goddess would envy. When I found her she was dressed in battle garments outfitted with weapons that she knows how to use."

The endearing way he'd spoken of her had Xena considering his words far longer than she otherwise would have. Gabrielle was about to say something to break the awkward silence, but Xena spoke before she could. "Where is she now?"

"She's staying with me at my cottage."

The worried looks the two women gave him made him take a step back. "What is it?"

"Listen to me..." Xena paused for his name.

"Leander."

"Listen to me, Leander. The woman you found is named Callisto and she is very dangerous. She was traveling with a group of men she recruited from a village two days travel from here. When they arrived at a village nearby, she tried to recruit other men that were already working for a warlord, and when he found out about it, he sent the rest of his men after them. The men she recruited fled and left her to fight alone. One of the men who survived the fight claims that she

didn't. We're here to find out if the story is true."

Leander's mind was awash in confusion. He had no reason to doubt Xena. Since her change of heart her word was her bond. Even a wood craftsman who lived alone knew that. But there was a slight expectation in her voice at the mention of Dawn's or Callisto's or whomever's end that made him defensive of the woman who'd become such an important part of his life in such a short time.

"I will take you to my cottage, Xena, if that is what you wish. But before I do tell me why it is you need to know what's become of this Callisto, and why it is that you speak of her end with anticipation in your voice."

Xena was solemn. "She's done great harm to many people."

"And that makes her your responsibility?"

Leander could tell from the momentary expression on Xena's face that if it hadn't been for her change of heart, his last question would have been exactly that, his last question. Gabrielle's face betrayed a combination of pain and concern. She'd never seen the damage that Xena's army had inflicted upon Callisto's home village of Cirra, hadn't seen the many innocents cut down like tall grass in a field, but she knew the emotional toll the deed had taken on her friend. When Xena's heart had changed, every previous personal triumph, no matter how small, had become a personal tragedy complete with scars that would never heal completely.

Xena offered Leander only a single word laced with more meaning than he could ever imagine. "Yes."

He considered Gabrielle for a moment, and there on her young face he saw some of the pain that Xena must have felt with such an admission.

The stories of the bond between them are not exaggerated, he thought, then he nodded in the direction of the road that led out of Modeia.

"Follow me," he said. "I promised to be back before sunset."

* * *

She was standing by the window looking out at the long stretch of worn earth that led from the cottage to the road when Leander appeared with the two women. Her mind began to spin as she watched them approach cautiously. Then, as the taller of the two women quickly drew the sword sheathed at her back, her memories finally came together. She saw no kaleidoscope of images merging into one coherent form, or any murky scenes slowly becoming sharper like temples before shadowy forests approached on horseback. Instead, she saw the threatening face of that same woman surrounded by the flames that up to that point had existed only on the fringes of her mind. Ever since the morning she awoke those flames had been embracing something that was just beyond her reach. Now it was there for the taking.

And as the screaming voices of her deceased family echoed in her mind, she turned to the battle garments and weapons that waited just

beyond the stool and scroll, and smiled as only she can.

* * *

The sound of hooves had Leander running for the cottage before Xena could reach for him. She and Gabrielle passed him just beyond the doorstep as they ran for the backdoor that stood open to the coming darkness. In the distance they saw a cloud of dust surrounding a woman on horseback whose long blonde hair seemed woven from the last of the sun's rays.

"Are we going after her?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena sheathed her sword. "Yes. But not until we see if she left anything behind that might tell us where she's going."

When the two stepped back into the cottage, they saw Leander sitting by a stool. On top of the stool was a scroll pinned in place with a knife.

Whether he'd heard them return or just sensed they were there, neither Xena nor Gabrielle could tell. But as soon as they stopped a respectful distance from him, Leander spoke without taking his eyes from the scroll.

"I apologize for questioning you earlier, Xena. You were right about... Callisto."

Gabrielle was about to say something to comfort him, but before she could she felt Xena's hand on her shoulder. She knew without any more passing between them that Xena wanted her to remain silent, so she held her thoughts as Leander turned to them.

"I gave her this scroll so she could write down everything she remembered. I thought it would help her get her memory back if she read over everything that came back to her, no matter how fragmented it all was."

Neither Xena nor Gabrielle said anything when Leander paused. It was obvious he was reliving memories of his own, memories he could never build upon with anything other than an end he'd never wanted to imagine, despite his trust in Xena.

"She added two items to the list before she left. The last one is your name, Xena. She wrote it in her own blood before she pierced it with this knife."

Leander grabbed the handle. The knife was firmly in place. And though he now knew how lethal that same knife could be in the hand of one who was both predator and prey, he couldn't help but think fondly of the wood he'd split to free it.

After several long moments, Gabrielle's curiosity finally got the best of her. "What did she write before that?"

His voice was mournful. "The kindness of Leander."

The End

End
file.